

Halo: Revolutions

by tyratoku

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Summary: Halo: Revolutions is a series of one shot short stories detailing multiple military and civilian stories set in the Halo universe. Taking inspiration from the professionally published Halo: Evolutions, this fan-fic has everything from campaigns featuring SPARTAN-IIIs, to space battles with Covenant Sangheili, to UNSC rescue missions. Read and Review please!

1. Protecting Assets - July, 2544

Protecting Assets

** July 26, 2544**

** Meridian, Miridem**

Chief Petty Officer Second Class SPARTAN-II Sheila-109 stepped into the small and cluttered office of Doctor Catherine Halsey. Sheila wore her Mark IV powered assault armor from the neck down. Her M Variant "Security" helmet was under one arm, allowing her short hair to breath in the stuffy underground atmosphere. Halsey, the matriarch of the entire Spartan-II program, looked up from her datapad with an air of annoyance. She wore a yellow blouse under a white lab coat that was cut to the middle of her thigh.

"Sheila, I told you not to disturb me," she said quickly.

"Ma'am," Sheila began. The entire room around them suddenly shook and sent books that rested on shelves crashing to the floor. Half-empty cups of coffee clattered to the cement ground and quickly spread; soaking Halsey's shoes. "The Covenant has arrived."

"Damn," Halsey whispered. Sheila barely heard it even with her enhanced hearing from her genetic modifications. It was not the first time she had heard the doctor swear, but it was uncommon enough to make Sheila pause. Halsey took the moment and grabbed a datapad from the desk in front of her, as well as a memory crystal from a drawer

below.

The room rocked against its foundation yet again and Sheila stepped back as Halsey jogged by her. Dust fell from the ceiling above and Sheila felt a knot tighten in her stomach. She put her helmet on, waited a moment for it to interface with her neural implant, and followed Halsey down the hallway. She hitched a left and led the lone Spartan through a maze of underground hallways. The Office of Naval Intelligence had gone through great lengths to ensure that this underground facility could withstand heavy bombardment from any enemy. Any enemy but the Covenant.

"Ma'am, we really should be leaving-."

"You can wait," Halsey ordered. While technically a civilian, every Spartan respected her authority and submitted to it as if she were a Vice Admiral. "We have to retrieve something."

"What-" Sheila started. The ground beneath them shook yet again, forcing Sheila to jump forward and keep the doctor from falling to the ground. Clipped onto her back was a standard M45 Tactical Shotgun mounted with a modified Green Dot Sight that allowed her to sync it to her inner MJOLNIR systems and shoot without aiming down the sights while still maintaining accuracy. She also had one M7 Caseless Submachine Gun and an M6D pistol strapped to her thighs. "-can be so important that you're going to almost die to get it?" Sheila asked.

"Our future," was Halsey's only reply. Irritated, Sheila took two large strides forward and scooped the doctor into her arms. Not weighing more than fifty kilos, the doctor might as well have been light as a feather to Sheila's medically enhanced strength.

"You walk too slowly," Sheila murmured and began to jog forward at a pace that made even the fittest of UNSC Marines sprint to keep up. The passageway ahead was fully abandoned, most, if not all, of the ONI personnel supposed to be working down here had abandoned stations twenty minutes ago when the Covenant had first appeared in the system.

"Left," Halsey whispered as she tried to finish typing something into her datapad. "Right," she ordered. Sheila obeyed, quickly turning corners. Sheila's heavy boots sent resounding deep sounds throughout the facility. A woman in a half-ton of armor running at three quarters speed made quite the ruckus. "Second door on the right," Halsey finished. Sheila, without breaking stride, shouldered through the door and came to a stop in a large room that was empty save for many different computer displays and a large central super computer in the middle of the room. "Thank you," Halsey said as she was dropped to the ground. The doctor jogged forward and began furiously typing in commands at the nearest computer monitor.

Sheila turned her head to the left and down, her right hand going up to push against the outside of her helmet. She then looked back up at the doctor, who had bypassed all security measures and was quickly dumping terabytes of files into a memory crystal she had already plugged into an input device. "Doctor, we have less than ten minutes to make it to the escape craft."

"I'll be done in less than three," Halsey quickly replied. She exited

the current application, withdrew her memory crystal, and quickly skirted to her left to another nearby computer. She restarted the process, again downloading files to her personal memory carrier.

Sheila moved back out into the hallway, looked both ways, and then stepped back inside. "Ma'am, can I ask just what is so important? And don't just tell me "our future" again, or I'll break the computers and take you up myself."

Halsey smiled and looked into Sheila's green eyes. "Early stages of the next A.I. generation. It might not seem important, but if I don't bring this data with me we'll be set back by years." The doctor paused and saw something cross Sheila's face and nodded to herself. "You're worried about them, up there."

"Yeah," Sheila nodded back. "Because if they all fail while we're still down here, we're dead."

Halsey stepped over to a computer that she had abandoned a few moments earlier and quickly swept her fingers across the keyboard and began to type in a few commands. A moment later, a camera feed from up on the surface appeared. She motioned for the Spartan to watch, and then returned to her work.

The camera must have been mounted on top of some type of building downtown, for it was pointed downwards at an intersection in the city of Meridian, the capital of the planet Miridem. From the left side of the camera feed, a swarm of Covenant drones flew through the air, wielding deadly plasma pistols and needlers. In the center of the intersection, a handful of police vehicles and two UNSC Warthogs were parked in a haphazard barricade. Ten Meridian police officers opened fire on the drones with a variety of weapons. The Drones seemingly effortlessly dodged the incoming fire and continued to make their way forward. They hailed fire down on the Meridian police force in waves and one by one the police officers fell. The Drones moved on without a celebration and a moment later Sheila saw a half dozen Grunt-mounted Ghosts travel down the street with a heavy Wraith tank trailing them.

"Ma'am, we really need to go," Sheila ordered. She looked away from the camera feed and glanced to the doctor. She had cleared three more computers and was working on another with only one more after it. The Spartan returned to the feed and flipped through a menu to figure out where it had come from. It was from only a few blocks away.

"Almost finished," Halsey replied. Her voice strained, she was obviously nervous of what was going on above.

"No," Sheila said spontaneously. She donned her helmet and marched across the room, grabbed the doctor, and hefted her onto her shoulder. "We're leaving now."

Halsey reached behind her and barely managed to grab the memory crystal as Sheila sprinted out of the room and down a hallway. Underneath her, linoleum tiles kicked up in her wake. They shattered and split into pieces as she sprinted to an exit. Ahead of her, a door opened and a pair of UNSC Marines waved her to a wide elevator. She stepped inside and the doors quickly closed.

"How-?" Sheila began.

"Admiral Mason ordered us down here to make sure you got out of here fine," the first Marine started. On Sheila's display she saw that he was at the rank of Sergeant Major. The other was a corporal. Both held standard MA5B assault rifles in their hands, and both looked like they had gone through hell. Their light body armor was battered, dented, and burned, while the uniforms they wore underneath were frayed and tattered. Both men were covered with dirt and grime, and their eyes were dark. "And you running right at us saved us the time of searching for you. Thanks."

"No problem, Sergeant," Halsey replied. She was deposited onto her own two feet and was running through her memory crystal on her datapad. "Half the files are corrupted, of course," she whispered to herself. "Only able to save a fourth of it!" she thought out loud.

"What's the status on our exfiltration craft?" Sheila asked. She slipped off her M45 shotgun and checked the chamber. A shell pushed out the opening and she quickly caught it and re-deposited it into the open-magazine system. Satisfied, she slipped the shotgun back onto her back and grabbed each of her sidearms to make sure that they were up to the task ahead.

"You guys have a ready ONI ship," the corporal said in an oddly muted tone. Sheila detected a hint of anger, jealousy, or something similar.

"When we get on the surface, we'll have to high tail it to the hangar, and then you guys can get the hell out of here." The sergeant major forced a smile. He had come to terms with his duty, and knew that he wouldn't be getting off the planet in one piece.

The doors opened and Sheila stepped out into a world of war.

The building was supposed to look like some type of abandoned factory. It would have played the part on any other day, but the reinforced outer walls stood defiant against the backdrop of nearby buildings, making it stand out in an obvious way.

A half dozen Marines aimed outwards in a semi-circle in an attempt to make a security line. As the elevator came to a stop, the men sprang into motion and went into pre-decided positions on designated vehicles.

"Let's go! Let's go!" the sergeant major ordered. Engines grumbled to life, and the first of the two Mongoose all-terrain-vehicles sprang forward to scout the route the convoy was planning to take. The sergeant jogged to a waiting warthog with a Gauss cannon mounted on the back and waved the doctor and the Spartan towards it. He hopped into the driver's seat, waited for the doctor to get into the passenger's seat, and then gunned the craft forward just as Sheila got behind the turret. They drove in formation, with the mongoose out in front, two warthogs next to each other, and another mongoose to bring up the rear.

The convoy roared out of the hangar and into the deserted industrial district. They drove down the first street in silence, and then turned onto a wider four lane road that opened into a highway within

minutes.

"Incoming!" the sergeant yelled.

Sheila looked into the sky and saw a trio of Covenant banshee one-man fliers descending towards them. Sheila recognized the plasma cannons mounted to each side of the fuselage beginning to warm, signaling that they were ready to fire.

The convoy was on the highway, flying by long ago deserted civilian vehicles.

Sheila opened fire with her heavy turret and the M68 Gauss cannon launched a pair of 25 x 130mm projectiles down range at a speed of just under Mach 40. The first Banshee flier exploded in a cloud of purple and black smoke. The second tried to evade and roll away, but one of her rounds hit its wing and it spiraled to the ground. She adjusted her aim to take out the third, but one of the Marines behind her fired a perfectly aimed jackhammer rocket and the final flier exploded in a brilliant shower of light.

Sheila couldn't help but smile.

"Dropship on our six!" Sheila heard somebody yell. Her heart sank, and she spun the turret around to face the new incoming threat. It wasn't the standard U-Shaped Spirit Covenant drop ship, but one of the Phantom crafts that had only recently surfaced as a threat. The Phantom began to descend after them, slowly dropping lower and lower to the ground to gain speed.

The mongoose trailing the convoy slowed to break off from the convoy and the gunner on the back fired two rockets up at the drop ship. They harmlessly detonated on energy shields that covered the craft. The ship hovered only a few meters above the mongoose for a few long seconds before it dropped back and opened fire. The man on the back attempted to jump off and pull his friend, but both men were burned alive instantaneously.

"They're verifying targets before opening fire," Sheila thought out loud. "They're after something."

"Or someone," Halsey whispered.

"Damn," the sergeant major swore. Without warning, the vehicle swerved from the convoy, dropping down a highway exit and underneath the upper passage. Sheila heard the high-pitched scream of a dying Marine above, but it was cut short as they exited the highway and arrived on a four lane street littered with debris and abandoned vehicles. Behind them, Sheila watched as the drop ship finished with the escaping Marines and changed course to follow them down the road.

The Phantom dodged around light poles, buildings, and any other obstructions on its path after the single remaining warthog.

"Romeo Actual to Command, do you read me?" the sergeant major yelled into his headset. Sheila fired her Gauss cannon repeatedly at the Phantom, even though every single round detonated harmlessly on the ships' shields.

"Command here," a voice on the other end of the communication announced. "We read you loud and clear," he paused. Sheila could hear voices yelling in the background. "Do you have the package?"

"Yes sir," the sergeant major grunted. "We're en route now, but we've got a Covenant drop ship on our six. Our small arms fire cannot, I repeat, cannot pierce their shields. We can try to lead them away-."

"No, continue on to the evacuation point. We'll get everything ready for you," the voice cut the sergeant off.

"Sir yes sir. Romeo Actual out." The sergeant major turned the vehicle onto a side street and Sheila could finally see the edge of town, and with it, the entrance to the other Office of Naval Intelligence facility in the city. It was built into the side of a mountain that loomed over the once bustling metropolis, with six tunnels spread around the mountain that led down deeply into the facilities below.

As the vehicle left the city, the Spartan was able to look up at the sky and see the remaining half dozen evacuation ships heading out toward the atmosphere. They had started evacuations hours ago when the Covenant had entered the system, but civilian populations were just too slow. A battle out in space raged, and through the clouds Sheila could see explosions highlighting who was winning and who was losing. In the atmosphere, human Longsword and Shortsword fighters fought against Covenant Seraph fighters and Phantom drop ships. As she watched, one of the civilian-filled ships exploded and fell back toward the planet. Sheila swore quietly.

As they approached, she saw a blockade made up of concrete half-walls, twenty Marines in dark BDUs behind heavy turrets and rocket pods, and one Scorpion main battle tank. Two men waved them over to navigate through a small opening, and the Warthog moved under the entrance of the tunnel.

Inside, darkness loomed. Emergency red strobe lights flashed above closed doors. Light blue navigation lights guided their way further down into the tunnel. They had not traveled far before the sounds of battle echoed down after them from the surface above. Screams, gunfire, explosions, and the sounds of organisms dying bounced around the thick cavern walls all around them. Finally, after a minute and a half of driving as fast as the vehicle could drive, the road flattened into an even path that came to a stop before an open pair of sliding blast doors ten meters tall. The Warthog drove through slowly and stopped near the entrance.

A pair of naval officers approached, flanked by a team of four Orbital Drop Shock Troopers. The officers paid Sheila no mind, but the men behind them looked her up and down in disdain.

"Admiral Mason," Halsey observed. "It's nice to see that you didn't flee at the first sign of trouble and you'll see a lady off."

"I'd hardly call you a proper lady," the elderly man said. He had a thick handlebar mustache draped over his upper lip, and an M7 Submachine Gun was clipped to his side. His bald head shined in the low light, in heavy contrast of the dark skinned ONI officer that seemed to blend in with the shadows around him.

The ONI operative, Commander Jelani, gestured to the UNSC Prowler stealth spacecraft behind him. "Doctor Halsey," he said in an accent that gave him a purr to his words. "We need to get you and your research out of here as soon as possible," he was cut off as a huge explosion made the floor beneath them vibrate. The ODSTs looked beyond Sheila at the blast doors and then one looked at Mason, who nodded. The ODST snapped his fingers, and a technician by the doors was ordered to close them.

Sheila followed the officers and doctor toward the ship. While they walked, she observed the men and women around her. Close to thirty Marines and ODSTs nervously waited for the coming battle, while twenty technicians worked fervently to prepare the ship for departure.

"Most of your suggested modifications have been implemented," Jelani told them. "And that's all you'll have. Prowlers do not have many offensive capabilities, Admiral, so we're going to have a squadron of Longswords give you escort until you get out of the atmosphere. Then we'll have the UNSC *Dawn's Plight* provide extra security until you can jump to slipspace."

Mason shrugged. "That will have to do," He looked at the Doctor, and then the Spartan. "Let's board, ladies," he gestured, and led them up a set of stairs onto a railed catwalk that led to the ship.

"Sir," the leader of the ODST squad approached with his helmet on but visor de-polarized. "Our boys upstairs lost. Covenant forces are making their way down here. Blast doors will be able to hold back their vehicles, but ground troops will be here within the minute."

"Alright," Mason said. "Get your men into firing defensive positions. See if you can rig controlled demolition kits around the entrance-, "

"No time, sir," the ODST replied. Underneath them, the Marines and ODSTs sprang into motion and ran around the hangar. A wounded Marine with a shredded leg limped over to the Warthog that Sheila and Halsey had come in on and got behind the Gauss turret. It was an admirable defensive position.

Mason grabbed Halsey's arm and led her to the entrance to the ship. Just as they crossed the halfway point, the blast doors exploded into the hangar. Sheila looked down and saw a large portion of one of the doors fly at the warthog and sink deep into its chassis.

"Shit," Jelani murmured.

"Take her," Mason ordered. He un-holstered his SMG and stalked to the railing of the catwalk. He looked at Sheila, who nodded in agreement, and together the pair opened fire on the stream of grunts that waltzed through the doors. Sheila stood with her SMG in one hand and Magnum handgun in the other, next to the Admiral and his M7.

A squad of Jackals entered the hangar with their shields leveled to deflect rounds from all the Marines on the ground. Sheila aimed carefully with her handgun and dispatched half of them before her motion tracker picked up two large blips on the radar. She opened her

mouth to warn the men below, but it did not matter.

Two large hunters, the closest thing the Covenant had to walking biological tanks, lumbered through the destroyed doors. Their right arms were made up of Fuel Rod Cannons, and they leveled them at Marines scattered in hidden places. Sheila saw men die in droves, and from her angle, she could do nothing about it.

"Spartan," Mason looked at her. "Get on that ship. You're Halsey's best protection-", his words were suddenly cut off and his eyes searched her faceplate. She took a step back in confusion, and a moment later saw two large red holes begin to form in his chest. He was lifted into the air, and Sheila looked past him at the air shimmering at a height that could only mean one thing.

Sangheili. Elites. The Covenant field generals.

In the span of a second, her eyes flicked down to her motion tracker and saw that Halsey's IFF tags were inside the ship. With any luck, the ship was close to taking off. With only a bit more luck, she only had to stall the Covenant for a minute or two and Halsey would be safe.

It would certainly not be easy. She dropped her SMG and handgun and drew her shotgun without pause. She fired at both the dead Admiral and the Elite behind him. The buckshot tore through the Admiral's torso, spraying both her and the monster in blood, as well as destroying the alien's shield system. It roared in defiance and flicked its wrist and the sword it held, which sent the Admiral crashing limply to the ground. Sheila pumped her shotgun and fired again, taking the Elite's head off in a shower of gore. Behind it, three more Elites turned their active camouflage systems off, allowing them to be seen. Two had energy swords of their own, while the third held a plasma rifle in each ugly hand.

Sheila fired again, took out the closest one's shields, and moved her hand to push in a new shell before the second Elite charged her. She waited until the last second, pivoted her weight onto her other foot, and slammed the butt of her weapon on the back of the Elite's head as it shot by. It collapsed to the ground and roared in agony as Sheila swept her weapon back at the first enemy. It charged her and swung its sword at her, forcing her to step backwards in an attempt to dodge.

For the first time in her life, she was too slow. The sword cut through her armor and brushed against her chest at the same time that her feet fell on the wrong side of the Elite on the ground. She fell backwards and over the railing - her only instinct was to grab the closest thing to her, which happened to be the arm of the attacking Elite. Together, the two fell to the cement floor seven meters below.

She knew she lost consciousness. She did not know, however, how much time that had taken. When she opened her eyes, blood was splattered against the inside of her visor, and she could taste its copper-like compound in her mouth. Her eyes lowered to the motion tracker inside her visor, and saw that her allies, highlighted as yellow circles on the radar, had dwindled down to only a handful of men. The sea of red circles, synonymous with the Covenant forces, dominated her radar. She swore and rolled onto her feet with her shotgun still in

hand.

"Demon," a voice called. She looked and saw one of the Elites from the catwalk standing a few meters away. Behind him, the Prowler ship was gone. "You won your battle," the elite said to her in garbled English. It had four jaws that split into an X when enraged, and when it attempted to speak in Sheila's tongue, it struggled. Her eyes looked the Elite up and down, taking in its high-ranking red armor. "The ship is gone." The battle around her died. She could hear the surviving human forces around her speaking quietly on team-band frequencies, asking each other if they should shoot the quiet and content Covenant forces around them.

"My battle is still here," she replied to the Elite.

"Lies," the Elite walked sideways around her, strolling in a circle with its blue-white sword glistening in the low light. "Information fell into our hands about your V.I.P.," the Elite bowed its head and then grunted. "The package."

Sheila looked at the crowd around her. A dozen jackals with plasma pistols, twenty grunts with Needler rifles and plasma pistols, the two hunters with their fuel rod cannons, and four elites with swords and rifles. Even with the handful of humans still spread around the room, they were not good odds for anyone - even a Spartan.

"We will find her," the Elite Major cooed. "We will torture her."

"I don't think so," were the last words Sheila ever said. She blasted her shotgun into the chest of the leading Elite. From that close of a range, its chest imploded under the force of the buckshot, and its dead body was propelled backwards into the line of grunts behind it. The men around her joined their combined fire with hers to take down the alien forces, but Sheila was too slow. As she pumped her arm to bring a new shell into her shotgun, both hunters leveled their cannon arms and fired.

It did not matter if she was genetically enhanced. It did not matter that she was one of the fastest humans ever born. It did not matter that both hunters were taking rounds from human forces on all sides of them.

It did matter, however, that she had managed to give the Prowler just a bit more time to make it to space. Halsey was safe. Her research was safe. Sheila had made a little difference in the time the Prowler had to escape.

And just a little difference was all it took.

2. Engineering their Fate - November, 2553

Engineering their Fate

November 25, 2553

Yacy System

The battle raged in front of him and the rest of the bridge crew. All around them, on tactical battle maps and large display screens, the

camera feeds showed the battle over the planet of Yacy. Forty six Covenant Separatist ships battled against the small defending Loyalist fleet with numbers only in the teens.

Fleet Master Uja Mortumee let his lower left mandible drop and moved it side to side in an effort to alleviate the itch somewhere in his throat. It did not work, so he sighed and raised his hand to fix it instead. "Bring us around," the Fleet Master ordered.

The newly renamed CSS-Class Battlecruiser Honorable Rebel opened thrusters to swing itself around and open its heavy weapons batteries to face the battle. "Obtaining targeting vectors," the weapons officer, Rhas 'Oolan, spoke with a deep baritone voice. The second-most senior officer on the bridge, 'Oolan had been on the Rebel since before it had been christened a few days prior, and back when it had been part of the armada in the Yoleni system. Mortumee thought back with a bow of his head.

The Yoleni system battle had been a disaster. It was a Kig-Yar controlled system, and when the Rebel, then the Just Victory, had been alerted of the dissolution of the Covenant and the schism between the Jiralhanae brutes and the Sangheili elites, the Yoleni system was a battle front and one of the first theatres of the new war.

At first, there had only been six Sangheili ships in the system and only eight Jiralhanae, but within hours their numbers had doubled. Mortumee had taken control and eventually eradicated the Jiralhanae from the system, but not before they had lured the Kig-Yar jackals to their side. Most of the Kig-Yar escaped to another system and had disappeared with their large 30-ship fleet. Mortumee and his battle group had searched for them for weeks, but to no avail. The jackals were nothing like their namesake, Mortumee reflected, but instead scavenger rodents that his and cowered in corners where they could not be found.

Eventually, the Fleet of Moral Vengeance gave up and instead focused on the destruction of Jiralhanae and Loyalist fleets instead. The Fleet's numbers swelled under the command of Uja and only Uja. Nobody else could have led them, he knew. He was ruthless and was a tactical genius. He had been told so often enough growing up, and had proven it time and time again. Some of the fleet had wanted to salvage some of the damaged ships they left behind. Wrecks and husks of Jiralhanae or Kig-Yar crafts that could have been repaired, if Mortumee had wished.

Instead, he deemed them as "Tainted" and had labeled them beyond redemption. They had managed to recover a sizeable amount of Huragok, though, and that really helped his fleet. They occasionally got word from other fleets in other systems, doing similar work against the brute, jackal, and prophet armadas. They were falling apart; ship masters everywhere had become reliant on San Shy'uum leadership and guidance. Without their prophets, some ship masters had no drive to go forward, and even some of those that did wish to fight simply did not have the resources they were used to. Huragok were disappearing, they reported. Some they found dead, some just vanished. The engineers were numerous on the Rebel.

Because they were numerous and able to constantly repair and upgrade the ship and the rest of the fleet, Mortumee's battle group was in a

better position than most. Over the last three months, the Fleet of Moral Vengeance swelled to number over thirty strong, and upon the arrival into the Yacy system, had absorbed a smaller task force and grown to number 46. It was the largest armada Mortumee had ever commanded, and it seemed to have an obvious effect on both his body and soul. He had noticed it a few days ago; he had noticed his reflection on a standby screen, and noticed his height seemed to have increased dramatically. He was thicker, stronger, and felt power coursing through his arteries in a brand new way. Things came to him more quickly; his brain seemed to be firing on full throttle at all times. He was never caught off guard, and his decision making skills were unparalleled.

And the fact that he knew it only seemed to make it better.

"Twelve ships remaining, sir," the communications officer, Jeel 'Dejonk reported.

Mortumee looked down at the officer sitting on his control console. It had been modified to allow the officer to stand at all times, which the junior officer claimed allowed his leg circulation to flow better. Even so, 'Dejonk's head was at the same level as Mortumee's waist, and with a single turn of his head, Uja could see the three sided display in its entirety.

There, a tactical map shined brightly. Small red holo-projections battled against the blue representations of his ships. There was nothing that showed actual shots or explosions, but occasionally, the model-scale projections winked out and Jeel would report those ships as lost and destroyed.

Mortumee saw the ships as well as anything on the bridge, but he did not care to count their numbers. "How do our ships fare?" he asked.

Jeel seemed to calculate the numbers quickly. "We have four ships severely damaged, sir," he paused for a moment. "The Prevalent Certainty and the Salvation's Veteran have both moved in to provide defensive cover and rescue service," he reported with a quick glance over his shoulder up at the hulking mass that was the Fleet Master.

Uja brushed his throat with his finger again. "How are the Certainty's medical facilities?" he looked across the bridge at the weapons station. Rhas was hard at work with firing solutions. His orders had been simple, if any Loyalist ship strayed too closely to the Rebel, he was to reign the fires of hell upon the said craft.

No, it was not what Uja's Rebel was accustomed to, and it was not what the ship and its crew typically did. In every battle until today, the Fleet Master had led the assault himself. But, he reflected, the handful of ships they had picked up that morning had to prove themselves some time. That, and the fact that over two thirds of the entire fleet's Huragok engineers were onboard the Rebel, busy making repairs and upgrades that would push their Battlecruiser into the realm of a flag ship or super carrier, spec-wise, at least.

Jeel glanced over at another junior officer, a transfer from another

ship that was supposed to use the Rebel as a vessel to a promotion. Uja was well aware of it. Sangheili officers unworthy of command were stripped of their duties often enough that some of his best officers were sent to replace them. He constantly ordered in new crew members, and knew for a fact that because of it, his ship was full of the best and brightest the Fleet of Moral Vengeance had to offer.

"Above average," the junior officer, Moll Vatamee replied quickly. "The wounded should be in good hands," he shot in.

Uja flicked his eyes between Vatamee and a display. "They are not to waste supplies on those that cannot be saved," he ordered. "We are running thin as it is," he looked at Jeel, who nodded and got to work relaying the orders.

"Sir," a voice called out. "I've got something here," Uja turned around to face the navigations officer, a veteran warrior that had been demoted and had worked hard to rise back up through the ranks. He had been dishonored in the past, and though he should have been dumped on a backwater planet long ago and forgotten, Mortumee could not help but admire the strength and will power of the religious elder. "Long range scans are picking up a small battle group attempting to escape from the opposite side of the planet," Kal 'Skiram announced.

Mortumee moved to the screen that Kal watched. In the center of the screen was the large circle that represented the planet Yacy, and on one side was the battle above it, while on the other, three small red dots were quickly climbing out of the atmosphere in an attempt to flee. The computer quickly identified the three ships, and lines leading away from the small representations led to small three-sentence blurbs about each ship. A carrier, a destroyer, and-

"Cut them off," Uja barked as he turned to face 'Dejonk. "Any ships that are not otherwise engaged are to come with us," he clenched his fist. The deck beneath him began to vibrate as their thrusters powered themselves to full throttle. They quickly climbed over the northern pole of the planet and blistered their way toward them. "Who joins us?" he asked the communications officer.

'Dejonk consulted his charts. "Five ships right now, sir. Seven more have committed themselves to us when they finish dismantling the brutes they face."

Uja nodded and looked back at 'Skiram. "How long?"

'Skiram checked his charts. "In nine minutes we will be within firing range, sir."

Rhas quickly spoke up. "Shall I begin with targeting solutions on the three ships?"

The Fleet Master waved his hand. "On the carrier and destroyer, yes," he faced the officer and narrowed his eyes to small slits. "But not on the Super carrier," he turned to face the center of the bridge, and the large display mounted there. "We are to capture the super carrier Thriving Purity. Jeel, fetch commander 'Ziralai. Have him bring his senior-most officers."

Special Operations commander Nima 'Ziralai was the both the oldest and smallest Sangheili on the _Rebel_, and possibly the entire fleet. What he lacked in size, he more than made up for in proficiency with a wide array of weapons. A veteran of a hundred ground battles in the long war against the humans, 'Ziralai was a leader in every sense of the word.

He walked into the bridge covered head to toe in his exo-atmospheric jet black armor. Two plasma sword hilts were latched onto his armor, giving him easy access to his preferred weapons. Nima was flanked by two large, bulky Sangheili soldiers, both of whom wore armor similar to 'Ziralai's own.

"Fleet Master," 'Ziralai bowed his head. "How may I be of service to the fleet?"

The deck beneath Uja bucked, and he looked to see Rhas 'Oolan hard at work at his weapons station. The destruction of the fleeing battle group had begun. "Do you feel that?" Uja gestured to the steel floor beneath him. "We have entered the battle," he looked at the three special warfare operatives. "Against three ships attempting to flee the system. One of which is the super carrier Thriving Purity. I want it captured."

'Ziralai's mandibles opened and closed in an expression of amusement. "And you want me and my forces to do so?"

Uja nodded. "Yes, commander. And do not tell me it cannot be done. You have heard the tales of the battles over Earth. The demons took a ship to Onyx. There were only a meager handful of them. Your legions number over 100," Uja's voice rose in pitch and volume up until the last word. "The shields will be disabled by the rest of our fleet and then you will lead your forces aboard. Is this understood?"

'Ziralai nodded and bowed his head. "I was never going to say that it could not be done, Fleet Master. I have never done such a thing, but I am more than willing to try it," he opened and stretched his mandibles as far as they could go before he continued. "Taking a capital ship like that will take more troops than I have, Fleet Master." He looked over at one of his companions. "A ship like thatâ€|its crews number in the thousands. If they have a decent sized ground forceâ€|it will be a battle."

"I can have troops routed to the task," Uja agreed. "Jeel, contact the ships that travel with us," he looked back at the Special Operations commander. "Prepare your men. Alert me when you're ready."

Nima looked the Fleet Master up and down. "You are going to have their weapons and shields disabled, no? I would hate to lose a few ships full of fine men just because of an oversight on your crew's part."

Uja grunted in response and waved his hand. Nima took the hint and led his procession down the ramp of the bridge and through the doors behind it. Two large Mgalekgolo hunters flanked the doors and fidgeted in their heavy armor as the trio passed them. Uja paused in his pacing and watched the guards for a moment. He had never seen the two of them use the arm-mounted cannons or the thick body-sized shields they carried, but he had seen other Lekgolo colonies cut

humans in half with their shields before destroying heavy tanks with the cannons.

Those two were one of seven pairs the Rebel had on board, and were one of two sets that rotated the guard of the bridge. Uja snapped his fingers at Jeel, who turned to look. "Have Nima track down the non-guard Lekgolo. I want them on the trip as well." Jeel turned and bent over his console to complete the task.

"Sir," Kal called out. "The Departure is reporting a slip space anomaly forming near the outer part of the system. Multiple entry vectors, as far as I can tell. We are going to have company."

Uja sighed deeply as he checked the battle charts. Reports came in about the battle on the far side of the planet, where his fleet had suffered a handful of casualties, but the majority of the battle group was disengaging to face the new incoming threat. "The Purity and her escorts were making a break for that new fleet," Uja observed with a click of his jaws. "Any estimates on enemy numbers?" he asked the crew in general.

A junior officer that had been transferred onto Uja's bridge only that morning spoke quickly but confidently. "Between twenty and thirty, sir," he told them.

Uja nodded. So enough to match the remains of his fleet. "Route our twenty eight best to where the fleet will come in. Have the rest join us. Tell them we are trying not to destroy this ship. Disable shields and weapons batteries." The crew flurried with movement in attempts to fulfill their designated missions.

Uja paced the bridge and habitually clicked his jaws to and fro to pass the time. Reports periodically came in from the rest of the fleet. The enemy ships that had arrived numbered twenty nine strong, and were a hybrid Kig-Yar and Jiralhanae fleet under the command of an old and wizened San 'Shyuum. The armada that defended the planet of Yacy was destroyed, and the Fleet of Moral Vengeance was now split between two battles now instead of three.

He reflected sourly, however, that nine of his ships had been destroyed while dismantling the defending fleet and that number was going to increase as the war raged on the far side of the system. Someone called out that the shields of the Thriving Purity were disabled, and a moment later displays around the bridge showed the triumphant roars and faces of five ship masters. "Nima," Uja looked at a nearby screen. The elder elite soldier appeared with a look of amusement on his wrinkled face. "Honor light your way."

Nima bared his fangs and let out a low rumble deep in his throat. "Our blood will forge a thousand generations."

It was an age old tradition between warriors parting ways. Nima completed it to the letter, and it did nothing but fill Uja with glee. He knew he could trust the veteran with taking the new flag ship of the Fleet of Moral Vengeance. There was no other suitable candidate. And none better. "Can we spectate on the commander's progress through the ship?" he asked.

A junior officer scrambled through a set of commands, and suddenly, on the second largest screen of the bridge, a

first-person-perspective of Nima 'Ziralai suddenly popped onto the display. "Excellent," Uja clicked his mandibles. "Set up three ships in a defensive formation and send the rest to the outer system battle-," he was cut off by an embarrassing squeak from a junior officer.

"Sir, the outer system battle is all but lost," he reported.

Uja's nostrils flared as he turned to look at the battle progress charts. Half of the ships sent to engage the hybrid Kig-Yar/Jiralhanae fleet were destroyed. Five were missing, more than likely coward runners that fled from failure. Nine ships remained in a futile struggle against the armada of twenty one ships that they faced. Uja grunted and checked the progress of the reinforcement ships he sent to bolster their strength. They were a few minutes away at best, and even still, there were only ten.

"We capture this super carrier and lead the battle ourselves! We rout-," he was again cut off, this time from the weapons officer, Rhas 'Oolan.

Rhas snapped his jaws open and shut. "Fleet Master, that is not possible. The Thriving Purity's shields and weapons are heavily damaged. They simply cannot be repaired in time for a battle. Not today, at least."

Uja looked down at the officer in disdain. "Have all Huragok aboard this ship readied for departure. Message the other three ships on defense and tell them to do the same. As soon as Nima is confident that the Purity is ours, they all will be sent."

Rhas shook his head. "Sir, send as many Huragok as we have in our entire fleet, and we still would not have the numbers or the time enough to sufficiently repair the ship's defenses or firepower. Our only chance is to abandon this ship to leave it for later, and lead the charge in this, in the Rebel. Otherwise we will be overrun!"

Uja narrowed his eyes and held back a roar of fury. "Do not tell me how to run this ship, officer Rhas. Know your place." He eyed the front display again. Nima floated down to the ground inside the well of a gravity lift. Uja would give anything to be part of such an assault again.

Fluorescent blood sprayed up toward his face, and Nima 'Ziralai happily opened his jaws to allow himself the joy to taste the dying Unggoy. He looked up and down the hallway to see two more of his squad cut down a trio of the heretic vermin.

A garbled roar of an enraged Jiralhanae pack leader echoed down the passage. Nima spun on his heel and saw a quartet of the brutes standing in a loose diamond. The rear-most of them, the largest and more than likely leader, roared again and brandished a small package. It was a type of carrier bag that humans often wore when carrying extra gear in battle. The Jiralhanae could not see the special operations squad in their active camouflage armor, but Nima could tell that they knew his team was there. If not from the dead bodies strewn about their feet, but from the slight shimmers in the air wherever they walked.

"Leave it to Jir'a'ul to steal from humans," one of Nima's squad mates grunted into his ear. His second in command, Loa 'Lepimee, roared in response. Nima raised his arm and growled an order.

The brutes broke into a trot, not toward Nima's squad, he saw after a moment, but toward a nearby doorway that led to another maze of hallways. The squad of four Sangheili warriors chased after them, barely breathing heavily as they sprinted in a line. Eventually, they emerged into a large room with what looked like a large engine in the center of it.

"Those are the slip space capacitors," one of his soldiers announced. "What are the brutes doing here?"

Their answer was a flurry of plasma rounds that splashed harmlessly across their private shield units. Their active camouflage systems failed in unison, and suddenly the four elite warriors were dropped into the easily visible plane of sight. One of the brutes charged at them with fangs bared and arms outstretched. Nima calmly stepped forward and turned on his energy sword with an explosion of white-blue light. He lunged forward just as the Jiralhanae came within arm's reach, and the sword cut through the brute easily enough to send Nima stumbling forward on his feet. A roar sounded from his right, and he saw that two of his warriors stood victoriously over the corpse of another Jiralhanae.

"Where are the others-?" one of his men began. He was cut off by the sound of a discharging fuel rod cannon, and a moment later the elite exploded in a shower of brilliant neon-green light. Nima watched his two remaining warriors sprint after the attacking Jiralhanae.

Nima turned to face the large block of components in front of him. He had not been trained in any portion of the machine, and literally had no idea what he was looking at. "Jir'a'ul coward!" he called out. "Show yourself and die like the warrior you think you are."

His only response was a low roar, followed by a thunderous, guttural laugh. Nima's eyes followed along the path of sound, and he soon found the pack leader standing in the shadows of a large tube. In its large, hairy, and heavily muscled hand was the bag from before, only this time it was unzipped enough for Nima to see what was inside.

Human shaped explosive charges. He had seen them wreak havoc on doors and valuable goods at checkpoints throughout his many years fighting them. And the Jiralhanae stood next to the slip space engines-

Nima had no other option. He spread his mandibles and roared as loudly and as ferociously as he could. He leapt toward the Jiralhanae pack leader, but the distance was far too great. The last thing he ever saw was the most intense and bright light he could imagine, as well as an unimaginable heat. Then, blackness.

Uja's eyes narrowed and he flashed a glare at his communications officer. "What was that?" the Fleet Master's only reply was silence. He slammed a clenched fist on a nearby surface. "What just happened?" he demanded.

Weapons officer Rhas spoke first. "I'm picking up energy readings from inside the Purity, Fleet Master. Consistent with-", the

officer was cut off by a high pitched bark from Jeel.

"I have special operations on a secure line-", he announced. Uja turned to face a display, and a still picture of an unknown Sangheili warrior popped onto the screen.

"State your name," Uja ordered.

There was no stream for the conversation, so the picture did not move. "Loa 'Lepimee, Fleet Master," the deep voice replied.

"Commander Nima's second in command. Nima is dead, sir." The soldier paused to let it sink in, and then repeated it. "The Commander is dead, and the Jiralhanae have disabled the slip space capacitors here. Some of my teams are reporting that other critical systems have been similarly destroyed."

Uja roared a curse and then narrowed his eyes at the display. "Is the ship beyond repair?"

Loa was silent for a moment, and then spoke slowly. "It is not my place to say, sir, but from what my teams are telling me, it will require a lot of work."

"And a lot of time," Rhas said. "Fleet Master, we must pull our forces out of that ship and help our brethren face the heretic fleet."

Uja turned to face the weapons master. "Are you not a junior officer? Are you the leader of this ship? Of this fleet?" Uja clicked his mandibles together. "Jeel, send our escort ships ahead. We no longer require their service defending us." He turned to the display. "Loa, clear the bridge and find out what exactly is destroyed. We have Huragok incoming. I want escorts for each and every one of them. Commander Loa, I put my faith in your hands. Out." He slashed his hand through the air, and the picture of the newly promoted warrior disappeared.

"Report of the battle," Moll Vatamee called out. "Four of our ships have been destroyed. The other fleet is down only two. They have successfully split our fleet in two, and are in the process of splitting them up even further."

Rhas 'Oolan grunted and jumped from the lower bridge to the upper area, where Uja stood alone. "Sir, we must move now. Aid our fleet or stay here and flounder in our failure to take that ship."

Uja's fingers twitched at his side, yearning for the hilt of his energy sword and the chance to use it. "Step down, now." He ordered.

Rhas glared at his superior officer and shook his head. "It is well within our rights to strike down a commander that does not fight for what is right for his people. You have gone over the deep end, Fleet Master. If we do not leave to aid our fleet right here, right now, then our only other option is to run with our tails between our legs. I am not a coward, Fleet Master. My clan raised me to _fight_. Now let us do so!"

Uja saw a flash of movement to his side, and suddenly Kal 'Skiram had a plasma pistol drawn and pointed at the young officer. "Step down,

Rhas. The Fleet Master has led us through many battles. It is not your place to question him."

"It is all of our places," Rhas insisted. "You have commanded us well, Fleet Master. But your time has come. Your commanding privileges have come to an end. Step down with dignity, and your life can be spared."

Someone stepped up beside Rhas with a plasma pistol of his own. It was Jeel 'Dejonk.

"So we have split in two yet again," Uja glowered. "Was the Great Schism not enough to quench your thirst? Why do you insist upon breaking us apart a second time? We are already at odds with most of what was the Covenant. The Arbiter and his faction refuse to support or aid us. Do you do this for him? To gain his trust?" Kal climbed from his station to stand beside Uja, much to the Fleet Master's surprise and comfort.

"No, Fleet Master," Rhas flicked his wrist and a sun-bright blue and white energy sword flashed into existence. "I do this for the good of the Fleet of Moral Vengeance. For the good of all the Sangheili that serve under that banner. But most of all, I do it for us." Two junior officers stepped up behind 'Oolan with weapons in hand.

Uja shook his head and snatched the hilt of his sword off of his belt. "No, Rhas. You do this for yourself and nobody else. The glory in commanding a fleet of this magnitude has eluded you and your clan for generations. If you do this successfully, you would be hailed as the greatest of the Clan 'Oolan for a dozen generations. I understand exactly why you do this. Do not fool yourself into thinking otherwise. You do this for yourself and no one else." Moll Vatamee moved to stand behind Uja and nodded as a plasma pistol appeared from behind his back.

The doors in the back of the bridge suddenly opened, and two Mgalekgolo entered. They paused, mid stride, and took in the sight of the divided bridge. One began to raise his fuel rod cannon, but Uja waved his hand to stop them. "Do not interfere, hunters. This battle does not concern either of you," his gaze fell from the rebellious Rhas to the pair of Lekgolo. "Support whoever comes out on top and follow their orders. But do not enter this battle." The pair stiffened and then took a step backwards to displace themselves further from the battlefield.

Rhas bared his fangs in what passed for a show of amusement. "There is honor still in you," he said. "I congratulate you. But your honor will die with you. Here, on this bridge."

Uja turned his energy sword on with a blaze of light. "Okay then," he looked to his left, at Moll, and to his right, at Kal. Both of the officers nodded in reassurance. Uja gestured with his sword, and a moment later ferociously lunged forward with a roar of anger.

Ship Master Mar 'Releme wiped the blood from his eyes and slammed his other fist down at a nearby console. Around him, the Prevalent Certainty was falling apart. Emergency klaxons blared with sounds that made his already-bleeding ears burn. Most of the lights around the bridge were off, and sparks danced across the large room in showers of brilliant light. Half of his bridge crew were dead or

dying, and most of the other half were unfit to fight.

Something moved to his left, something biological, and he looked to see his navigations officer scrambling at a terminal. "Kra, what is it?" Mar managed.

The officer turned to look over his shoulder. It was only then that Mar saw that the young officer's shoulder was impaled with a long metal pole. "It's the Rebel, sir," he told him. "They're I'mâ€|" he breathed heavily and nervously clicked his mandibles. He pressed a button on his console and suddenly the flickering image of a long-range external camera feed popped onto a nearby damaged screen. The ship around them rumbled, still taking plasma bombardments from the enemy ships that surrounded them on all sides. The battle was lost. There was no other possibility.

The image popped in and out, a camera feed from a hallway just outside a command bridge. The bodies of two Sangheili officers lay motionless. Flashes of blue-white light sparked off to the right of the camera feed, bathing the bodies in light every few seconds. "A duel?" Mar asked himself. He looked over at Kra, and a moment later the officer slumped to the floor with eyes that stared off into the darkness beyond. Something flashed across the bridge; a report that the engines were past critical. They were going to overheat and possibly explode any minute now. Mar swore, but looked back at the screen. A new body fell on the ground, but Mar could only see the feet of the Sangheili warrior. He could almost see what type of armor it was. Was it the ornate armor of a Fleet Master?

The screen blackened, and a second later a camera mounted on the outside of the Certainty showed the Rebel turn away from the battle and disappear inside a slipspace portal.

"Cowards."

Something deep inside the ship groaned metallically, and distant explosions rumbled through the many decks. Mar kept his gaze on the display that showed the space where the Rebel had been the moment before it left the rest of the fleet behind. He watched that point until the explosion reached the bridge and white-hot light overtook him.

3. Friday the 13th - January, 2549

The unlucky incident on Friday the 13th

January 13, 2549

Unidentified planet

"Fuckin' Covenant," someone groaned. Janty Hill looked and saw that it was one of the two nurses, a young male with dark skin and hair probably longer than regulation length. He had an accent that probably pegged him as a guy from South Africa or the Mulder colony planet. One or the other, she guessed.

The only UNSC marine in the group, Lieutenant Commander Olivier, slapped his hand at the man's knee. "Fuckin' navy," he corrected. "We

had those split-chins outnumbered four to one and they still couldn't pull it off."

The pilot of their lifeboat, Lieutenant Edie, called back over her shoulder with a hint of panic. "Brace yourselves! Ridge and I can't pul-", her words were cut off as a jolt ran through the escape pod and the small craft lurched to one side and tumbled through the air. The pilot triumphantly screamed, and a moment later Jan opened her eyes to see that the craft had mostly righted itself and sailed forward.

At a steeper angle toward the ground. Edie swore, and a moment later they crashed into the dirt.

Janty did not know how long she was out, but the next thing she knew, Olivier's hands were under her armpits and she was being pulled out of the boat. She looked down past her feet and saw the front half of the craft smoking with a small fire underneath its control consoles. Edie's body lay awkwardly still on the ground.

She looked up into the Lieutenant Commander's eyes, and he smiled back. "You're awake," he grinned. "Didn't know if you would or not, I'll be honest." His accent reminded her of her great-grandfathers, who had hailed from somewhere in Texas on Earth.

She looked over her shoulder and saw the rest of the survivors packing gear into bags. Olivier stopped his trip and gingerly lowered her to the ground. He caught her eye and quickly explained, "Got a message from Captain Archibald, he made it off the King Kong and is setting up camp," he pointed to her right and at a large forest that went as far as the eye could see in front and behind her. "On the other side of those woods right there. Conveniently." He laughed to himself.

"When are we heading out?" the deep voice of Vaughn, one of the members on her crew, asked. They both were a part of the UNSC Mechanical Maintenance Corps, and had been working together alongside a few others in their group for over three years now. There were only two others from their crew that made it off the ship. Hazel, the group's leader, and Chuck, a wiry guy who had managed to grab an emergency fire-axe before they got off the ship.

"As soon as sleepy here can get on her feet," Olivier said with a sly grin. "Planet's uninhabited, so we obviously don't have satellite support anywhere. But by my completely uneducated and unfounded guess, we've got maybe a five hour hike? Give or take a few hours."

"A few hours can be a lifetime, El-See," Hazel grunted. Middle aged with salt-and-pepper hair, the woman had wrinkles that framed her face in a way that made her look ten years older than what she really was. Unfortunate, but it sometimes came with their line of work. "Especially if any of the Covie ships got off any boats of their own."

Olivier shrugged. "Doubt it. I mean, they only had three ships. And we obliterated two of 'em and the third one went down pretty quick too. Don't think any of em had enough time to get out."

Vaughn cut in with a grunt and wave of his hands. "Hell, if we ain't

got Covenant, then we've got wildlife I bet. Trees as big as this you gotta wonder about the predators they got here."

The female nurse, Abigail, swore and her face paled.

"Weapons?" Mubahn, the male nurse, asked. He was slender, tall, and looked like the frailest one of the group. Chuck grunted and hefted his axe in his hands triumphantly. "Besides Mr. Woodchipper over there."

"I've got my assault rifle," Olivier said. "And my sidearm." As he said it, he unclipped it and tossed it to Hazel, who caught it with a frown. Olivier walked to the crashed craft and looked inside. "Boat has one pistol. Really skimped out on us there." He threw it to Jan, who fumbled with it for a moment before finally getting it under control. "Extra comm unit," he threw that to the female nurse, who placed it onto her belt.

Hazel sighted through her handgun and then looked up at the distant sun. "About an hour, maybe two before we lose sunlight. If we want to make it there before peak dark, then we've got to move now."

Olivier began to walk toward the trees. "Then let's get a move on, ladies and gents. Got a lot of ground to cover."

They walked for hours. Eventually, Jan lost track of how long or how far they travelled. It was uneventful. Trees, bushes, logs, a river or two, and what seemed like a hundred game-trails where local wildlife would traverse, but to Jan, it was all standard fare.

"Got something," Chuck called out in his slow, collected Emerald Cove accent. The group followed his gaze and walked down a trail leading to the small clearing. They bushwhacked through a set of low-hanging branches, and were suddenly at the crash site. Whatever type of ship it was, Jan immediately knew it was not human.

"Covenant?" Abigail asked.

Olivier slashed his hand at his throat to silence her and crouch-walked to the entrance of the thing. Its door was wide open and the boat was empty. The Lieutenant Commander cleared his throat and snapped his fingers. "Looks like at least one split-chin made it off."

"How do you know it's one of those things?" Mubahn asked.

Olivier pointed to the control console. "For one, I've never seen anything but Elites pilot these. And two, no bodies. I can't see some Grunt or Jackal bitch making it out of this crash and walking away. But hey, there's blood. So whatever is out there is wounded, if not dead already. Keep your eyes peeled, ladies and gents, and we'll be okay."

"Another trail," Abigail called out. Olivier jogged over to the front of the group and got into position to lead them yet again. Jan took a steady breath and then turned to face the Lieutenant Commander.

He only got two words off before it happened.

"Oh fuck," Olivier whispered. Jan barely heard it, but she clearly

saw what happened next. The man was lifted into the air, with twin white-blue spikes that sprouted from his chest. The air in Olivier's chest rushed out, giving him one final, desperate groan, before he was unceremoniously dropped to the ground.

Mubahn, the closest person to the Lieutenant Commander, screamed in surprise and in reply the triangle of light slashed through the air and cleanly decapitated him. The headless corpse of the young nurse collapsed to the ground to rest next to the fallen Lieutenant Commander, and finally Janty sprang into motion.

Her brain flashed a hundred images into her retinae at once. The Covenant. Battlefield news feeds. A Sangheili Elite warrior. The Active Camouflage invisibility systems that some of the special operations warriors of the Covenant used. Energy swords.

Jan raised her handgun and fired at where she suspected the tall, brooding warrior stood. Nothing connected and the rounds whizzed by and into the forest beyond. Her shooting broke the silence and the group exploded into motion. Everybody ran in different directions. Vaughn and Chuck sprinted into the darkness to her right, while Abigail went left. Jan's eyes flashed to her right, where Hazel stood in a shooter's position with her handgun pointed.

"Run, Jan!" she screamed. The elder mechanic fired her weapon, and Jan saw something shimmer in the night air. The bullet impacted against an invisible force, and suddenly the blue-black armor of a Sangheili warrior burst into sight. The thing was tall, even for the Elite that it was. Three or four feet taller than Jan, and built as thick as a rhinoceros. In its right hand was the long, twin-bladed sword made of white hot energy that could cut through battle armor like butter, and in its left was the compact C-shaped plasma pistol that many of the Covenant favored.

The monster charged forward and cut through the air with its sword. Hazel's hands, and the handgun in them, detached themselves from her arms. She reeled back in anger, frustration, fear, and pain. The sword sailed through the air again, and Hazel's leg fell out from underneath her. Sounds that reminded Jan of alien laughter sounded through the air, and Hazel screamed one last word. "Run!"

Jan turned her back and sprinted as fast as she could away from the scene of carnage.

Chuck, a few dozen yards away, caught his foot on a low hanging branch and tumbled to the ground. He rolled to a stop and felt the side of his mouth, where a tooth was now missing. He grunted and slowly pulled himself to his feet.

Something sounded from behind him. A low, guttural growl that sent shivers up and down his spine. Chuck turned and powered his fire-axe through the air with all the momentum and strength he could muster. The light in the air bended around something in front of him, and he knew that was where he needed to aim. He miscalculated, but the momentum in his swing carried him forward and he stumbled to one knee. Something hard pressed up against his neck, and he was slowly lifted into the air between two long and think claws.

Chuck struggled to turn and face his assailant, and after a moment of returning force from the other, the mechanic was brought to face it.

The active camouflage system snapped off with a small burst of light, and the creature snapped its many jaws back and forth.

"Do it like a man," Chuck whispered. "Look in my eyes when you kill me, you bastard."

The creature returned his words with stumbling syllables from deep down in its throat, twisted and bloodied as it was. "Gladly." It grunted.

Chucks neck snapped like a thin twig beneath the Sangheili's fingers.

Far away, Jan stumbled over sticks and rocks and under low-hanging branches. "Vaughn! Chuck?" Janty screamed out into the forest. "Abigail!"

No one and no thing responded back to her, and she knew that the chance they were alive was slim. That Sangheili, the elite Covenant warrior back there from the escape podâ€|it wore the black armor of a Special Operations soldier. It was the best the Covenant had to offer, and that fact that it was there with themâ€|armed as it wasâ€|and they only had a few weapons themselvesâ€|

The assault rifle.

It suddenly flashed into her mind, the only true weapon any of them had. She had the pistol still in her left hand, and she knew that it theoretically could take down a Sangheili, but with her complete lack of experience, she knew it was impossible for her to take it down herself.

But with Olivier's assault rifleâ€|she could have a chance. Vaughn was old, maybe he had some military training. Her footsteps faltered beneath her, and she turned back to face the escape pod. It was far away now, a minute or two jog, probablyâ€|but the blue and purple lights that danced along its outer hull could be seen from a distance. She could find her way back relatively easilyâ€|

"Jan?" a voice called out. She turned and saw Vaughn standing a few yards away. "Jan, come on, we have to-", a moment later the large man's voice was cut off as the hulking form of the Sangheili crashed into him. Vaughn was lifted into the air with the Sangheili's arms wrapped around his chest. They squeezed, tightening on Vaughn's torso with enough force to break bones.

Vaughn swung something at the Elite's head, and the monster stumbled backwards a few feet. Jan took her chance and looked through the small scope on her handgun's rails. She flicked a switch, and the eerie green-white image popped into frame as a night vision filter took over. Vaughn held what looked like a large branch and swung it with the ferocity of a dying lion.

Jan fired her handgun but missed on the first shot. The second and third, however, slammed heavy slugs into the Sangheili's shields. For a moment they flared orange and yellow, but then collapsed in a shower of sparks. The creature roared and lunged forward with its right hand. Jan panicked, pulling the trigger as fast as she could muster. Two shots missed, but the third found home right in the hilt of the Elite's energy sword. The blade faltered and disappeared, but

the hard bar in the hand of the gargantuan still proved a valuable weapon as it slammed hard into Vaughn's face.

The mechanic flew backwards, with blood pouring profusely from a large cut above his left eye. He rolled to a stop, but managed to get his feet out underneath him and face the Covenant survivor. The Elite looked down at its broken energy sword and cast it away with a toss over its shoulder. It raised its left hand and pointed the plasma pistol it held at the sulking mass that was Vaughn the mechanic. Vaughn grunted in acknowledgement a moment before the pistol discharged and dissolved both his shirt and the skin on his chest.

Jan took the opportunity and fired at the Sangheili's head. She cried in gleeful surprise as blood sprayed out from both the entrance and exit wounds on each side of the creature's skull. It crumpled to the ground with a soft final gasp, and Jan looked up to see a distant light through the trees. Salvation?

She jumped over the body and ran as fast as she could toward the pinprick of whatever created the light. It was not as close as she originally thought. She stumbled and fell a handful of times, and did not see some branches in the darkness of night. More than once she ran head-first into a branch and was nearly knocked unconscious. All the while she cried. Cried for fear. Cried for anger. Cried for pain. Cried for happiness of survival.

As she got closer, sounds began to drift through her ears. What sounded like men and women yelling and talking, laughing and crying? Screaming? No, that could not be it. They were jolly, working to get themselves off of the stranded and desolate planet. The light began to dissolve into a scene of constant motion.

She burst from the trees with a triumphant scream.

Abigail lay on the ground not far from her. She had a large cavity in the center of her chest, and orange-silver smoke sizzled from the wound. Ahead of her, the remains of a recently and haphazardly constructed human camp lay in smoldering. Tents and quickly made permacrete structures burned, what looked like what had once been a human camp was in smoldering ahead of her. Jan's eyes moved to the sky, and she saw a large Covenant Carrier drifting above the clouds. Dozens of Phantom and Spirit drop ships descended toward the ground and rained fire upon the survivors of the camp.

Jan let the tears flow freely from her eyes as she dropped to her knees next to the deceased form of Abigail. Jan was the only survivor of the lifeboat, the only one to make it through the forest alive. And it did not matter. As she reflected on the last few hours of her life, a spotlight searching the ground found her. She could hear the roar of the Covenant engines above her, and felt the heat collecting in the sky as the plasma turrets warmed up their energy pools. There was simply nothing she could do.

End
file.